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**USDA conservation experts, town officials work to restore  
vegetation along Sawmill River, mark Earth Day 2004**

MONTAGUE, Mass. – Representatives of the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), the Town of Montague, and the Franklin Conservation District marked Earth Day 2004 this week by planting live willow stakes at three sites along the Sawmill River. The planting is among assistance provided by NRCS at the town's request as part of an on-going river restoration project.

Rita Thibodeau, NRCS district conservationist for Franklin County and several other NRCS and conservation district staff members joined Montague Town Planner Robin Sherman in planting the willow stakes at the river's edge at two sites along Leverett Road and one site in the state wildlife area at the end of North Street.

Once established, the willows will shade the river, keeping water temperatures cool enough for trout and salmon to survive in summer. The vegetation will also protect water quality by providing a buffer to catch run-off from the road during rainstorms. In some locations it will also help prevent riverbank erosion and sedimentation in the river.

Over the past eight years, the Town of Montague has contacted NRCS several times for assistance in repairing extensive storm damage to roads and bridges in the Sawmill watershed and to stabilize a severely eroded bank, which threatened a highway.

The Sawmill River watershed encompasses some 32 square miles in the western Massachusetts towns of Leverett, Montague, Shutesbury and Wendell. The river travels fourteen miles from its headwaters at Lake Wyola in Shutesbury to its confluence with the Connecticut River in Montague.

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